



## National Pork Producers Council

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**National Pork Producer Council Comments**  
**at the President's National Food Safety Initiative Public Meeting**  
**October 2, 1998**  
**Presented by Beth Lautner, D.V.M., M.S.**

I am Dr. Beth Lautner, a veterinarian who currently serves as the Vice President of Science and Technology at the National Pork Producers Council (**NPPC**). I am pleased to present these comments on behalf of the nation's pork producers. U.S. pork producers recognize the importance of producing a product in which their domestic and international consumers could have the highest confidence. In 1994, NPPC established a Pork Safety Committee with the mission of assuring the safety of U.S. pork through coordinated, science-based efforts through the pork chain. This Committee directs extensive farm-to-table research, education, and technology transfer programs for the pork industry.

I would like to begin by emphasizing the importance of continuing to make our current system work while discussions are taking place on possible changes or reorganization of responsibilities. All of the agencies represented here have been making significant efforts to enhance food safety and we must not lose focus or be distracted from what needs to be done now because of what the future may hold. Our producers are especially familiar with the many past accomplishments and current endeavors at the Food Safety and Inspection Service (**FSIS**) and an unwelcome outcome of these discussions would be a lack of continued commitment to current efforts.

NPPC has specific comments on the five questions posed with regard to the vision statement.



1. *Does the vision statement accurately depict an achievable food safety system vision? What modifications, if any, would you make?*

One element that is missing in the second sentence is the critically important areas of education and technology transfer. The sentence should conclude in this manner "...**integrated** research, education, technology transfer, surveillance, inspection, and enforcement". The National Academy Science (NAS) report *Ensuring Safe Food* on page 69 clearly states that "Part of the role of the federal government in ensuring safe food is to promote education and research." NPPC supports more emphasis in the vision statement on the need for education and technology transfer of the results of research. The educational effort, of course, needs to have a farm-to-table approach.

2. *What are the barriers to pursuing this vision ? What gaps currently exist in the food safety system that impede achievement of this vision?*

Obviously, the involvement of multiple agencies and regulations in food safety necessitates coordination of efforts. NPPC would recommend that the President's Council on Food Safety clearly outline what food safety efforts are currently underway in the area of research, education, and policy and then determine what is needed. The agencies then need to determine who is best equipped to address **any gaps**.

One void that is readily apparent to pork producers is the lack of involvement of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in on-farm food safety efforts. Prior to its movement to FSIS, APHIS had this responsibility and had developed a comprehensive strategic plan to work with producers to address food safety at the farm level. APHIS' Veterinary Services brings significant expertise and resources with over 420 veterinarians in headquarter or field positions. Many of their veterinarians have specialized training in epidemiology and public health. APHIS has a proven track record in educating producers on animal health and food safety and in conducting effective programs at the farm level. Through animal health eradication and control programs, APHIS veterinarians are on farms on a daily basis interacting with producers.

As mentioned in the NAS report, APHIS conducts health monitoring through the National Animal Health Monitoring Systems or NAHMS program. In swine, in the past, NAHMS has included looking at the incidence and risk factors for potential foodborne pathogens. When APHIS had the on-farm food safety responsibilities, some of the more than 300 APHIS veterinarians in the field had developed creative proposals for on-farm cooperative food safety projects at a state and local level.

They are the only agency that has the field force that can develop geographically broad-based programs. In this age of limited resources, an opportunity is being missed by not taking advantage of APHIS' strong presence in every state and extremely capable staff. Dr. Bonnie Buntain's small Animal Production Food Safety staff at FSIS is doing an excellent job of developing cooperative programs at the farm level but is lacking the feet and legs in the country to reach more producers.

We must find a way to use the resources already in place, therefore, NPPC strongly urges the Secretary to include APHIS in the President's Council on Food Safety discussions and re-evaluate that agency's role in food safety programs.

3. *To make the vision a reality, what changes are needed for (a) government agencies at the Federal, State, and local level; (b) industry; (c) public health professionals; (d) consumers; and (e) others?*

Increased cooperation obviously is important in realization of the vision along with a clear defining of roles and responsibilities of Federal agencies. Industry needs to continue to be more proactive in the food safety area and communicate more extensively on the industry efforts underway. The lack of information in the NAS report on commodity specific quality assurance programs was disappointing. All major commodity groups have quality assurance programs. The pork industry's PORK QUALITY ASSURANCE<sup>SM</sup> Program has been in place since 1989 and currently includes more than 75% of U.S. production.

In addition, NPPC has a comprehensive farm-to-table strategy with regard to research and education that includes an extensive on-farm *Salmonella* research effort, development of an on-farm food safety certification model with government oversight, in-plant HACCP research, surveying of retail meat case with regard to temperatures, sponsoring of training programs for foodservice managers, and direct delivery of food safety education to consumers including military commissaries.

With regard to consumers, we have conducted focus groups with consumers to evaluate their knowledge on food safety issues. It was apparent from these groups that consumers want information that empowers them to accept their responsibilities in food handling and preparation.

4. *What **should** be the short-term goals and critical steps to realize this vision?  
What should be the long-term goals and steps?*

Both a short-term and long-term goal has to be more coordination of food safety research efforts. The pork industry is looking forward to the work of the Joint Institute for Food Safety Research. This effort must not just look at Federal food safety research but look at how cooperation can be enhanced and duplication avoided among all groups with research responsibilities and those providing research funding. Extensive lists of food safety research priorities already exist from numerous conferences, workshops, and reports. Demonstrable progress on addressing these priorities must be made. We do not need to spend more time on saying research is needed on the epidemiology and ecology of pathogens. It is past time to have a coordinated effort to identify species- specific, **pathogen-**specific scientific working groups to develop targeted research agendas and research programs. We must have a framework in which to measure progress in research and determine when there is information that needs to be passed off for technology transfer. At NPPC, we have formed groups such as a *Salmonella* researchers group. This group evaluates current research and sets the next level of research priorities. We would strongly encourage development of these types of researcher groups. Again, with limited resources this helps ensure duplication is avoided and that progress can be measured.

A critical step to developing a coordinated national food safety research agenda is a comprehensive food safety research database. This research database should not just have a listing of research projects that have been completed and published. It should contain listings of projects that have been funded either with public funds and to the extent possible, all other funds. The database should contain the researcher's name, affiliation, project objectives, and key words.

Having such a database provides many benefits such as identifying research voids, linking researchers in an area, avoiding duplication, speeding technology transfer activities, and providing an opportunity for funding agencies to identify researchers for targeted projects.

The National Agricultural Library is currently exploring developing this type of database. NPPC would encourage an advisory board to be formed for this effort to ensure that what is developed is useful to as broad of an audience as possible and that it is designed to encourage participation by all funding institutions. The database must be a living entity, not just a repository for completed work or papers. It is extremely disturbing that this database has not been put in place previously given the current resource allocation to food safety research.

**5. *What is the best way to involve the public in development of a long-term food safety strategic plan? What additional steps besides public meetings would be beneficial ?***

The agencies have done a good job of providing numerous opportunities for public input. Pork producers expect their national and state associations to communicate their positions, which are developed through the producer-based committee process.

In conclusion, it is important that progress continues on the development and implementation of a science-based food safety system while potential changes are discussed. NPPC appreciates this opportunity to offer comments on how this can be accomplished. Pork producers are ready to do their part to address their responsibilities in providing a safe, wholesome product to consumers.